TO BE WHOLE AGAIN
Mark 5:24-34
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Heart specialists have observed a very curious phenomenon. The touch of a nurse's hand can slow a patient's racing pulse. In fact, the simple hospital routine of pulse-taking often calms arrhythmic heartbeats. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for people who have lost love or companionship to develop heart trouble. Those observations were made by Dr. James Lynch, specialist in psychosomatic illness at the University of Maryland Medical School, in a book, The Broken Heart: Medical Consequences of Loneliness. Dr. Lynch concludes that "the rise of human loneliness may be one of the most serious sources of disease in the 20th century."

His reflections were included in an article on "Loneliness in America" in the New York Times Magazine several months ago. We are in the midst of an epidemic of loneliness, it seems, and there are some rather clear reasons why. In the first place, there is something in the American character which admires and celebrates aloneness. Independence and self sufficiency are admirable traits. The proto-typical American hero from ccwboy to private eye is a loner. In 1830 Alexis de Tocqueville noted its beginnings and described the Americans he met as "locked in the solitude of their own hearts."

What is new about the loneliness of our age is that the old ties of family and community which have held people together since the beginnings of civilization are rapidly disintegrating. 25% of the people of America live alone. Most Americans do not live where they were born. A large percentage of those who live alone, away from the place they were born, chose to live that way. Many are women, the first women in their families to elect not to be married and have children. Many of the people who live alone are divorced. The American divorce rate is higher than it has ever been and the highest in the world. One out of every two marriages started this year will end in divorce. One out of five American children currently lives with a single parent.

Those are not opinions or judgments. Those are the objective statistics of vast social change. And one of the results is widespread loneliness. How are Americans coping? John Hinkley was so lonely he shot a President to get the attention of a movie star. Some people smile back at the TV anchorman, others watch the soaps for human companionship, singles bars and massage parlors provide human contact of sorts, some dial "Time and Temperature" just to hear a friendly voice.

Business understands that there is a profit to be made here. The Times article pointed out that, "The promise of companionship sells everything from banking services (you have a friend at Chase Manhattan) to condominiums (you can't be a stranger long). The telephone company takes direct aim with, "Reach out and touch someone" - preferably in another State.

The author concludes, "The language of the 80's tends to be a rather cold language of connection. We speak of 'networking' and 'interfacing' but underneath we're really looking for people we can depend on, people who will laugh at our jokes and listen to our nightmares. We don't really want to interface with our networks. We want to cuddle our grandmothers and take walks with our lovers. Above all, we want someone to talk to." ("Alone: Yearning for Companionship in America", New York Times Magazine, August 15, 1982)

Loneliness: "pain turned inward" someone called it. The result of social change, mobility; no respecter of age, nor sex, nor geography, nor station. It is a modern phenomenon, as we have been thinking about it. Yet it describes a woman who appears very briefly and compellingly in the fifth chapter of Mark. Her hour on the stage is so fleeting we never learn her name. She is an interruption. She isn't even on the program.

The main story has to do with Jarius whose daughter is terribly ill. Just at a very dramatic and tense moment, when Jarius has told Jesus that his daughter is at death's door - and pled with Jesus to come - and Jesus has decided to go, just at that moment, here comes this woman; filthy, outcast, shoving her way through the crowd and grabbing his robe.

She was a very lonely person. She had what the New Testament calls a "flow of blood", which modern gynecology could regulate or cure, but which, in her day, was frightening, mysterious, and regarded with general disgust. For twelve years she had borne her embarrassing, debilitating curse. Madelyn L'Engle has her say:

"I was tired from hurting
Exhausted, revolted by my body,
Unfit for any man.
I wanted to rest,
To sleep without pain or filthiness or torment.
I really don't know why
I thought he could help me
When all the doctors
With all their knowledge
Had left me still drained
And befeft of all that makes
A woman's life worth living." (The Irrational Season, p. 125)

In addition to the physiological condition which she didn't understand, and which in itself presented her with monumental personal, public, and aesthetic problems, the woman was regarded as unclean by Jewish Law. She was virtually taboo. She was barred from any kind of religious ceremony. Normal human relationships were out of the question. People didn't want to be near her. She was to be avoided. In a day when belonging to a family and the nation gave an individual identity and a sense of self, this woman had neither. She was, for all practical purposes, a non-person. To make matters worse, the Levitical Law, which every Jew knew, held that uncleanness was contagious. "...if anyone touches an unclean thing - or if he touches human uncleanness, he shall be guilty." (Leviticus 5:2 & 3) Notice particularly the word "guilty". That's the rub.. Contact with uncleanness rendered a person unclean and also guilty. The tradition was that the woman was somehow responsible for her condition. She not only felt awful, her religion wanted her to feel bad about feeling awful. The idea is not far from that pop theological rationale Job's friends tried on him, namely, that one's physical maladies are a result of sin, a kind of bottom line divine justice which all of us have felt on occasion. This woman's culture told her she was unclean, guilty, unfit for human contact - every single day for twelve years.

She was, that is to say, desperately lonely: lonely in a way words cannot adequately convey. It is no wonder that she came up behind Jesus rather than confronting him face to face. It is no wonder that she reached out for his robe rather than explaining her situation and asking to be healed.

German theologian Helmut Thielicke reflects that in his life time of contact with the church he has never heard a sermon on this passage. The reason is that the Gospel of Mark claims that the woman was cured as soon as she touched Jesus' robe and that claim...is a bit of an embarrassment to us. It sounds like superstition.. Our sophisticated approach to the faith requires understanding first: it certainly requires rational explanation for whatever happens. The woman, obviously, doesn't fit our criteria.

But instead of either rejecting the story as implausible - or - accepting the miraculous cure as the beginning and end of the transaction, let's think a bit deeper and look for the meaning of what transpired.

Madeline L'Engle suggests that there is a difference between curing diseases and healing people, that sometimes both happen simultaneously, but that given a choice healing people is more profound, more difficult and infinitely more precious. Thus the real miracle and the real meaning here is that a human being was healed, made whole again because love reached across the taboos of culture and religion and touched a lonely woman.

"Wholeness" - human life lived fully, intentionally, completely - that is the object of the Christian enterprise. It is not to turn people into arrogant, exclusive critics of the rest of the race, which seems to happen too frequently to devoted Christians, but to integrate, to open windows, to heal and make whole. "The glory of God", the early church theologian Iraneaus said in the 2nd century, "is a human being fully alive." That is the object of the healing Jesus did. That is what happened here. A lonely woman was made whole again.

She is joined by others in the New Testament: the woman who annointed our Lord's feet with perfume because he had exorcised her demons and made her whole; the Samaritan woman at the well whose domestic life was a disaster and to whom Jesus gave "living water", filling her cup and making her whole.

None of those people understood much about him. None could have passed a very simple theological examination. They may not even have been able to meet basic church membership standards. None even wanted to follow him. Each came to him out of despair. Each was made whole by his willingness to make contact, literally to take on himself the condition each of them bore. When no one else would touch them, he did. When all of society seemed aligned against them, he reached across the chasm with humanity and caring and love.

There were no conditions attached to that healing, by the way. The only requirement apparently, was an acknowledgment of need and the courage to risk vulnerability. The woman had to come to Jesus with her need. She had to push through a crowd and actually reach out in desparation. Jesus called that faith: not theological understanding, not service to others, but the simple acknowledgement of personal need and the simple act of reaching out to one who can heal.

We live in a time which requires the church of Jesus Christ to play a responsible role in the world. Arriving at that role and then playing it requires a lot of attention, a lot of planning, a lot of money and, because Presbyterians value the deliberative process, a monumental amount of arguing. We belong to a church which defines itself in terms of the service it renders to

the world. And we are part of a congregation that gives itself generously and corporately to the world immediately around it. And sometimes we need the reminder that Christian faith is, first of all, a very personal matter; that Christ's kingdom on earth has to do with justice and peace in the structures of a society, but first it has to do with you and me and wholeness or, if you prefer, salvation. The saints and scholars, the martyrs, the heroes and heroines, who have changed institutions and shaped history out of their Christian passion have understood thtt the Good News of Jesus Christ is, first, good news of a very personal nature.

The value of this little story is that it reminds us that Christianity addresses our needs. That is not a familiar idea for many of us. In a workshop recently, the leader read the Resurrection story in John 21 in which Jesus tells Peter to "Feed his sheep" and then she told the ministers that each of them had heard that story as a demand - to be about the work of feeding Jesus' sheep in their parishes and in the world. But, she suggested, sometimes you are the sheep. It was a simple but very touching experience. Each of us needs an occasional reminder that we have needs, that Jesus Christ is God's answer to those personal needs.

Psychology confirms the traditional wisdom of theology, interestingly. Salvation is knowing that one is accepted by God, loved by God. The psychologists tell us that wholeness, health, depends on the self acceptance which comes from knowing oneself accepted by others. That's what Jesus Christ means, basically, fundamentally.

And now, we are beginning to see the pain of loneliness in similar terms. Dr. Reuel Howe said it beautifully: "...the deepest want of all is the desire to be at one with someone, to have someone who can be at one with us, and through whom we can find at-oneness with all." (Man's Need and God's Action, p. 9)

So may we conclude in the simplicity of this little story itself. The story is for us. We feel unclean at times, unacceptable; there are things about ourselves we don't like...there are things about ourselves we don't understand but which we know make us difficult, unhappy, unpleasant.

The story is for us because we have needs. And one of the more urgent of them is to acknowledge that we have needs.

The story is for us. Deep inside there is occasional loneliness, isolation, alienation. It strikes at odd times - in the quiet of late evening, in intense physical pain, in inane cocktail party conversation, in the frustration of not being able to tell another how deeply we love, and, of course, in our humanity, our finiteness, our sense that one day we will be alone.

The story is for us and it is about us. And it is about a Lord who loves us, who waits only for some desparate clutching at his robe, to heal us. It is about a God who loves us so much that out of the complexity of life itself, he stretches out a hand to make us whole again. That is the Good News. AMEN.

God of love, break through our carefully constructed defenses. Bridge the gap of busyness, self sufficiency, self control. Touch us; heal us; make us whole. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.